

WESTFORD

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Meeting House fire protection system installed

by Gordon B. Seavey

WSFD-Should Zeus, God of the Elements, wish to target the old meeting house at The Common with his lightning and thunderbolts, let him be warned that henceforth his efforts will be wasted.

For now, after an effort of ten years to provide proper fire and lightning protection to the sturdy two-century house of worship, the most modern fire protection warning equipment is in place.

At the cost of nearly \$35,000, the building is now ringed with lightning protectors; the chimney has been relined; old electric wiring has been replaced; and four dozen heat and smoke sensors are strategically placed from basement to the weathervane.

A central control box would indicate the exact location of where there might be fire, smoke or something overheating. The system is wired directly to the central fire station at the lower end of The Common, now staffed 24 hours a day.

When the final decision came to raise the necessary funds for a fire alert system, Susan Powers and Marjorie Wyman were named to head the sizeable committee to co-chair the task group. Not only did the parishioners respond generously to the fund raising effort, but outside groups, businesses and former parishioners sent in checks.

After all, wasn't that sturdy house of worship erected by the whole town two centuries ago?

The simplicity and beauty of the austere sanctuary shows little change. The sensors are small with only six on the ceiling. The others are tucked here and there, mostly unnoticed.

Long overdue

The old chimney had loose and missing mortar between the single course of bricks. A stainless steel liner was inserted from the top, and then packed with fireproof insulation. It is also grounded with the lightning protection system.

The only defense against Zeus' lightning bolts had been wrought iron rods, probably made by a local blacksmith, linked together from the weathervane direct to the ground. New lightning rods parallel to the old system, were attached to the copper roof beneath the bell, extending to the rear of the roof and up the 60-foot steeple.

With the frost finally out of the ground, the entire project was completed with the sinking of new metal grounds.

The heat and smoke detectors are separate units tied into the main control box. Signals from each go to the fire station to indicate the exact location of the problem.

The old electrical wiring was a hodge-podge of intermittent wiring since the early 1900s. Electricians have removed all questionable circuits and replaced them with code-approved materials.

Plans are on the table for enclosing the boiler room with fire proof materials.

One longtime member of the parish stated, "We've just been lucky over the years that no calamity has struck this landmark, truly

Westford's most precious most historical gem. If fire had struck, such a building could never, never be replaced. Its loss in monetary terms would be insignificant in comparison to its historical value."

Built in 1794

The present meeting house is the third, constructed in 1794 by the townspeople when "church and state" were one, and dedicated a year later. The pastor, Rev. George E. Downey, says the exact date of the building of the first church was probably around 1724.

Becoming outdated by 1771 it was moved over the snow to South Chelmsford where it served the Baptist congregation near Heart Pond for a number of years. The second edifice was built in that year, but

alas, it was consumed by fire in 1793, its nails raked from the ashes and sold at auction.

The town immediately voted to erect a new church and appointed a committee "to look out a piece of land to Set the meeting house on, and give L20....voted that the South Side Sill shall be in a parallel line from the Southeast Corner of Joel Abbot's (from whom they bought the acreage) house to the southwest Corner of Richard Kneeland's House." The latter is the present site of the library.

The dimensions: "Voted that the meeting house be built 65 feet long, 48 feet wide and 28 feet posts, with a tower at the west end built nearly uniform and according to the rule of good architect.

"Voted to have 58 pews on the lower floor and 24 pews in the gallery....Voted the woales (walls) of said house be swelled & the windows be Cased and made flaring with glass in them to be 8 in. by 10 in. in size; that there shall be but one pare of stares to go into the Pulpitt; that the Pulpit Canapy & Deacon Seete be nearly in the form that Chelmsford meeting house is, and that the pews shall be finished with ballasters as our old meeting house was."

Lightning rod

It was to be painted three times over, and have a conductor for lightning. The original lightning rods are believ-

ed to have been made by the Park Brothers in Groton (now Ayer) as the original Academy building was being erected during this period. That building, which is now the town museum, has similar rods.

In general, the meeting house has changed much over the years. Col. Zachaeus Wright, a benefactor of the Academy, was "paid L57 for a note he gave at Boston for a Bell."

Rev. Downey says that for those days this house of worship must have been quite a stylish and most impressive edifice. One tradition states that the Boston Bell which called the worshippers was from the foundry of Paul Revere, and that the weather-vane atop the steeple also was fashioned by Revere. The weathervane, recently regilded in gold leaf, is 120 feet above the ground.

The bell has inscribed upon it this couplet:

*"I to the church the living call
and to the grave I summons all."*

A couple of years later the town record states: "Voted that the Hoss Stables behind the meeting house be built nine feet high." For the need of space, these buildings are long gone, the reason being obvious.

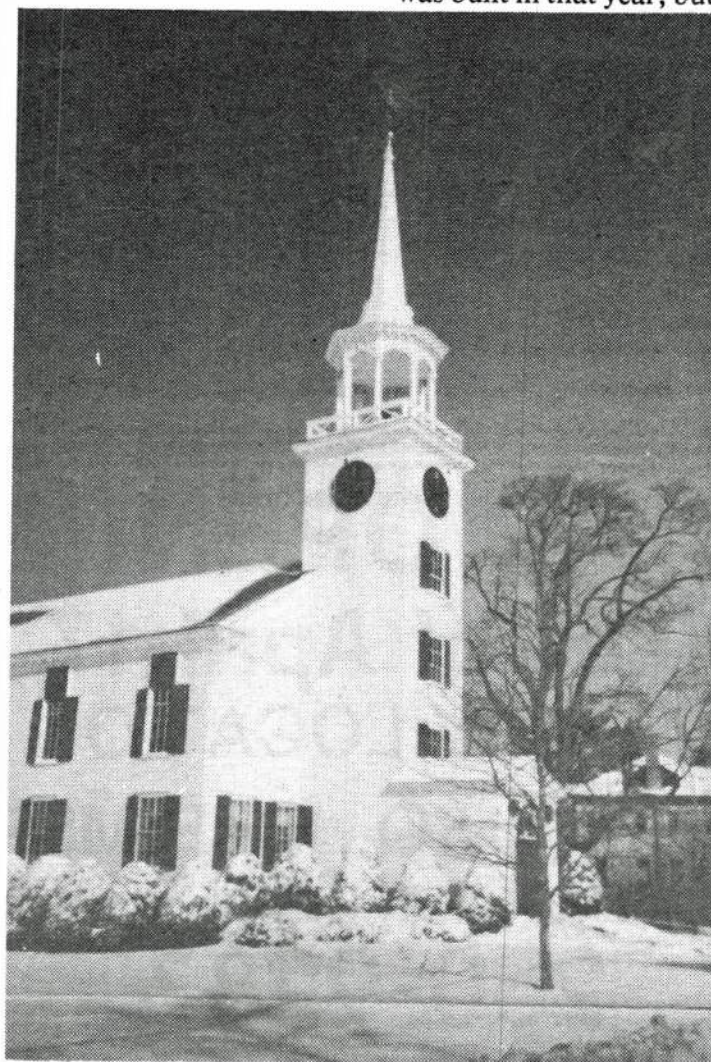
The early churches had no heat. While working with the contractors, Rev. Downey and Prof. John Walkinshaw noted in the attic a square piece of granite, above two inches thick, which had a six-inch hole in the center. They surmised that it was used to pass the stovepipe through the ceiling of the sanctuary and the roof for the first stove installed in the church, which was not until 1823.

Did lack of heat ever discourage church attendance?

It was shortly after the Civil War that the church was turned 90 degrees so that the front of the steeple faced The Common, as it does now. The reason for this is not clear. Without the modern equipment of today, this was understandably a major project.

Now that this ancient house of worship, whose white spire rises above the tree tops on the highest part of Tadmuck Hill, has the most modern fire system known to date, Zeus will think twice before he throws those thunderbolts toward a building which luckily has defended itself all these years.

[(Gordon Seavey, a native of Westford, has a special interest in the First Parish Church as he was baptized there 83 years ago. His parents, Homer and Addie Seavey, were active members.)]



WSFD-THE 200-year-old First Parish Meeting House at Westford Common is now encased in a \$35,000 fire protection system which includes smoke and heat sensors, new electrical wiring and expanded lightning rod protection. (G.B. Seavey photo)